

A Divisive Peace

Luke 12:49-53

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August 15, 2010

A pastor fresh out of seminary was assigned to a small church in the hills of Kentucky. In his first sermon, he condemned gambling, especially betting on the horses. The sermon was not well received. "You see, Reverend," a parishioner explained, "this whole area is known for its fine horses. Lots of our members make their living breeding race horses."

The next Sunday the pastor spoke on the evils of smoking, and again, his sermon was not well received, for many of his members also grew tobacco.

The third week the pastor preached on the evils of drinking, only to discover after that a major distillery was one of the town's largest employers.

Chastised for his choice of sermon topics, the frustrated pastor exclaimed, "Well, then, what can I preach about?" A kindly, older woman spoke up and said, "Pastor, preach against those godless Chinese communists. Why, there isn't a Chinese communist within 4,000 miles of here!"

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we come across a teaching that rubs us the wrong way, a teaching that hits close to home in a critical way. This morning's text from the Gospel According to Luke is one of those Scripture lessons. Just one week after hearing Jesus say to us, "Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom,"¹ we hear Jesus exclaim, "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"² Just one week after Jesus promises that his faithful servants will be rewarded by the Master when the Master returns³, we hear Jesus declare, "Do you think that I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."⁴

Last week's message of assurance was a welcome one. This week's message of division and conflict is not one we so readily want to receive, is it? I heard one person refer to today's passage as belonging to what he called the "Fifth Gospel." When I first heard that, I thought he was one of those academics who was trying to push the envelope in terms of acceptable Biblical scholarship, by inserting some obscure ancient mystical manuscript into the canon of Scripture. But that's not what he meant by the "Fifth Gospel."

What he was referring to was this: We all are familiar with the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And we all have special verses we have underlined, verses that warm our hearts with promises of blessing and grace and forgiveness and love. But in amidst all the verses we love are those we tend to skip over, verses like "The one who has two coats should share with the one who has none, and the one who has food should do the same..."⁵, or "whoever wants to become great among you must be your

¹ Luke 12:32

² Luke 12:49

³ See Luke 12:35-38

⁴ Luke 12:51

⁵ Luke 3:11

servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all...,”⁶ or “if any would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”⁷ Verses like these comprise the “Fifth Gospel,” the gospel we are reluctant to embrace because it rubs us the wrong way.

This morning’s text is certainly part of the “Fifth Gospel.” It seems paradoxical that the same Jesus who was heralded by the angels as the One who would bring peace on earth is also the one who said he did not come to bring peace, but division. What do we make of this difficult saying? How can we reconcile what Jesus says here about fire and trial and conflict and division, with everything else we have embraced about Jesus and his love and peace and grace and forgiveness? How can the One who is the Prince of Peace also be the one who tears family and friends asunder?

The answer is very simple, really. When we choose to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves at odds with the world that is set against the ways of God. Jesus has assured us that God’s disposition toward us is to grant us the kingdom, to forgive us and to welcome us with steadfast love. But for us to choose to turn toward the reconciling love of God will at the same time turn us against the tide of the world. And when we choose to go against the flow, we will find ourselves in turbulence.

In his sermon on the mount, one of the things we hear Jesus repeatedly saying is that his message is different from that of the world. “You have heard it was said,... But I say unto you,...” goes the refrain. To choose the way of Christ is to choose to swim upstream, to go against the flow. And when we choose to go in a direction that is opposite that of the world, we’ll find ourselves in turbulence.

Humanity doesn’t always appreciate the reversals the gospel of Jesus Christ brings about. When the gospel and the world collide, you can expect there to be tension and conflict. Here we are in the middle of August, and we hear Jesus announcing trouble for those who choose to follow him. But when Jesus first spoke these words, he was on his way to Jerusalem, just weeks away from his ultimate confrontation with the forces of evil, just weeks away from the cross. Jesus knew that his message of peace and reconciliation with God come only in violent opposition from a world that depends on a different status quo—one that can survive only in the absence of the message of grace and love and reconciliation and welcome. When the gospel and the world collide, you can expect there to be tension and conflict.

These days the Weather Channel is pretty much a staple of everyone’s life in the U.S. Rarely a day goes by that most of us don’t at least glance at the Weather Channel. And so you’re probably aware that when a mass of warm air encounters a mass of cold air, the result is usually a thunderstorm. That’s what Jesus is saying here: when the warm air of the grace and love of God comes up against the cold, selfish, hard-hearted nature of the world, there’s going to be conflict. Thunderstorms are going to happen.⁸

Just over a week ago, the Taliban ambushed and killed ten members of the humanitarian Christian aid medical group, International Aid Mission. Warm air, cold air, conflict.

In other parts of the world, Christians are actively persecuted for their faith. The Christian worldview of grace and justice is counter to worldviews of other systems that thrive on systems of class, racial divisions, and power. And so it is not uncommon for Christians to be disowned by their own families. I remember one of the first stories I heard of a person outside of the Bible who was persecuted because of

⁶ Mark 10:43-44

⁷ Matthew 16:24

⁸ The analogy of the warm air /cold air conflict and thunderstorms comes from C. Edward Bowen, “100% Chance of Thunderstorms,” August 19, 2001.

his faith. It was the story about a young man in India at the beginning of the 20th century, named Sadhu Sundar Singh. When he was just a young teenager, he heard about Jesus, and he told his father that he believed in Jesus. Upon hearing him say that, Sadhu Sundar Singh's father threw him out of the house. That night, the young boy became violently ill; his father had put poison in his meal before making him leave the house. Warm air, cold air, conflict..

I remember a couple from the church I served in Midland. Rick and Mary Helen were living in India for two years, while Rick was on assignment with his oil company. They had a housekeeper named Shubangi. Shubangi had just recently become a Christian. But she was reluctant to tell her mother that believing in Jesus would enable her to be free of the caste system. For Shubangi, the decision to accept the love of God in Jesus Christ and to follow Christ came at the risk of losing her family, maybe even losing her life. Warm air, cold air, conflict.

It's not always that drastic, certainly in a culture of religious tolerance like we have in the United States. But that doesn't mean we still don't experience tension and conflict. Maybe it's as simple as a father grooming his daughter to run the family business, only she feels called to go into the ministry instead. Who does she listen to? Whose voice does she heed? Does she dutifully do what her father has planned for her in the family business, or does she heed the call of the One she has called Lord? Warm air, cold air, conflict.

A sociology professor every year begins his course on "The Family" by reading to his class a letter, from a father, written to a government official. In the letter the father complains that his son, once obedient and well motivated, has become involved with some strange new religious cult. The father complains that the cult has taken over the boy's life, has forced him to forsake all of his old friends, and has turned him against his family.

After reading the letter, the professor asks the class to speculate what the father is talking about. Almost without exception, the class immediately assumes that the subject of the letter is a child mixed up with the "Moonies," or some other controversial group. After the class puts out all of the possible conclusions they can think of, the professor surprises them by revealing that the letter was written by a third century father in Rome, to the governor of his province, complaining about this weird religious group called "The Christians."

Jesus would say this should be expected.

Walter Brueggemann used to tell his seminary students, "You don't have to try to get into trouble; if you just stay close to the teachings of Jesus, those teachings will get you into all the trouble you will possibly want."

It's true. The human race doesn't always appreciate the reversals the gospel of Jesus Christ brings about. The ways of Jesus collide with the ways of the world. Warm air, cold air, conflict.

And so Jesus says to us, "Come and follow me. I am the Prince of Peace. I offer you peace that passes all understanding. Only, it's a peace that will also result in conflict."

Are you willing to accept the peace he has to offer you?

It'll cost you, you know.

Amen.